ジョーカー・ゲーム

柳広司

JOKER GAME

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角川文庫

Joker Game - Volume 1 - Chapter 1

Chapter 1

“I love Japanese culture! So far I’ve seen geishas and Mount Fuji. All that’s left is a hara-kiri show. I look forward to your performance, now if you’ll please!” The American technician, John Gordon, smirked, moving aside from his doorway.

“Go!” Sakuma commanded in a low voice, and the military police behind him rushed into the house.

“Hey! No one enters my home with their shoes on! Lieutenant, tell your men to take off their shoes!”

Sakuma entered anyway, still in his shoes, ignoring Gordon’s protests. Sakuma cast a glance at the tall American from the brim of his cap: blond hair, hooked nose, blue-grey irises — a classic foreigner, yet, this man donned authentic Japanese garments.

A Japanese enthusiast.

Sakuma had well-expected it based on the report he had seen beforehand.

John Gordon came to Japan three years ago after being invited by a major trading company. Since then, he had become “a slave of Japanese culture” and resided in the country. He inspects the precision machinery imported to Japan at the firm, at the same time, Gordon rents a traditional Japanese residence in Kanda, and lives his life using bowls and chopsticks while sitting at a chabudai. [1] Gordon sleeps on a futon laid across the tatami, and the wine he drinks in the evening is sake. He even took up the samisen[2] and finds entertainment among geishas, completely immersing himself in the Japanese lifestyle.

The report Sakuma had seen was able to even confirm that Gordon

“prays before the portraits of the royal couple day and night”, and is showered with praises from his neighbours. Despite his habit of speaking rapidly in English after being excited, the life Gordon has been living has more Japanese flair in comparison to other foreigners in the country.

However, a man provided Gordon’s name during torture after being taken into custody in another case. Gordon was suspected of being a spy and taking covert photographs of cryptographic ciphers used by the Imperial Japanese Army.

This was enough to confirm the suspicions, but…

“Bring back all the evidence.” Colonel Mutou of the Imperial Army seemed to be hungover again. His voice was hoarse and displeased.

“That man has to be a spy. But when you see dirty bastards like him, just lay out all the evidence in front of him and he’ll keep coming up with poor excuses. Bring back reliable evidence and leave them speechless.”

Sakuma had received these orders from the Colonel during a recent visit to the General Staff Headquarters.

As he passed by Gordon into the dimly lit house, Sakuma was suddenly baffled by the uneasy atmosphere, and stopped in his tracks. He looked back, and reconfirmed himself of his “target”.

—There was definitely something about this man.

The military police Sakuma led were dreaded by both the Japanese and foreigners, however, when the “highly notorious” forces moved into the property, Gordon merely shook his head in feigned confusion, blue eyes glinting with glee.

(Where does his confidence even come from?)

As though he was searching for an answer, Sakuma gave the mission his full attention, and had closely followed Second Lieutenant Miyoshi since the start.

Miyoshi wore his military police's cap low, his eyes were hidden, the lower half of his face barely visible, expression blank and emotionless.

(Implying that I've made a serious mistake…)

Sakuma felt a trail of cold sweat trickling down his back through the uncomfortably tight uniform.

Suddenly, the shadow of the man who takes on the name of the "Demon King" flitted across his mind, and disappeared.

Sakuma first met the man a year ago in April, the 13th year of the Showa Period (1938).

"You really are a fool." The shadow standing by the window suddenly said.

The morning sunlight was shining through a window that took up most of the wall.

Sakuma remained silent, squinting his eyes from the light. The shadow moved away from the window, bypassing the large desk that stood between them in a slightly stiff manner, and came to a halt beside Sakuma who was standing at attention.

"What kind of person bows while wearing a business suit?" the shadow muttered.

Sakuma realized what the shadow meant by this, and hastily relieved himself of his posture.

Upon feeling the other man's leave, Sakuma slowly let out a sigh before turning to face the back of the man he had only known as a "shadow".

The man before him carried a lean physique, his skeletal frame making him seem overly thin. He was tall by Japanese standards. His long hair was tied at the back of his head, and he was dressed in a pristine grey suit.

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki.

The formidable senior officer of the Imperial Japanese Army.

Sakuma registered the stiffness of his motions: Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki leant onto a cane and walked with a limp in his left leg.

The Lieutenant Colonel made his way around the desk just as he had done mere moments ago, and settled himself in a sizable armchair.

“So, you are the spy they sent from General Staff Headquarters?”

Sakuma immediately retorted at the sudden inquire.

“No, I am nothing like of those despicable…” Sakuma paused in mid-sentence, and abruptly swallowed.

“Spies are despicable, aren’t they?”

The Lieutenant Colonel smirked from across the table, becoming a shadow again. Sakuma momentarily recalled the rumours back at Headquarters, sending a chill down his spine.

—Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had been an exceptional spy.

Rumour has it that the Lieutenant Colonel had spent years going undercover in enemy territory, sending back vital internal intelligence to the Imperial Army. That is, until he was arrested after his identity had been exposed by an ally. The Lieutenant had managed to escape opportunistically after undergoing interrogation and torture, bringing back critical information to Japan.

But that was, after all, a rumour.

(This isn’t a child’s adventure novel, there’s no way a person like that could exist in the real world.)

Sakuma had merely laughed upon hearing it.

He glanced at the Lieutenant Colonel’s interlaced fingers on the desk. Even in the sanctuary of a house, Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki

donned a white leather glove nevertheless.

It was said that the fingers of his right hand were mangled during interrogation carried out by an enemy intelligence agency. He had since then worn the white glove on his right hand to hide the scars. The interrogation had left the Lieutenant Colonel's left leg crippled as well, rendering him unable to walk without a cane. Moreover, the shoulder that was concealed beneath his suit still bears scars that would unnerve those who dared take a look.

(How could this be? People like that should not exist…)

Sakuma felt an inexplicable touch of unreality.

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Under the proposal of Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki, the Japanese Imperial Army established the brand new "office for preparation of affairs established for the facility of development of intelligence service officials".

A facility for the development of intelligence service officials.

That was a training facility for spies, also known as "a spy training agency". When everyone learned of its reason of establishment, disputes were triggered amongst internal staff.

"The Imperial Army already has the 4th Branch of the 2nd Bureau, as well as the 5th to 7th Sections that make up a single branch responsible for clandestine operations of their own. There is no need for external organizations." [1]

That was merely an external excuse; the actual reason had been the fact that the internal staff have had always strongly regarded that spying is "an act of cowardice", and despised all forms of combat of the type.

—Spying is a form of expediency, and violates the traditional moral values of the Bushido[2] by nature.

Many executive officers do not hesitate to openly state this approach.
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Having taken the situation back then into account, their so-called “a single branch responsible for clandestine operations” was no more than a small number of senior officers carrying out seemingly questionable activities, barely supporting their cause.

Incidentally, at the same time, vital information had leaked to foreign spies. In order to cover up the loophole, the Imperial Army had revised the statutes of the Ministry of War[3], causing the belief that “spies (and training facilities) are useless” to disappear.

However, the “students” of the training agency were not graduates of military academies or universities[4], they were chosen from common university graduates. The decision caused an uproar from the internal departments.

—Apart from people of the military, the rest were disregarded.

That reaction was expected from the military, whose mindset has long been infused with that of the belief.

“How could they let those half-assed ‘chiho jin’[5] handle confidential military intelligence?”

The so-called “chiho jin’ was a term used by the Imperial Army to refer to non-military civilians.

Granted that the graduates of the military academies had been thoroughly instilled with the mindset of soldiers during their period of study, they would have been considered. However, for the military to place their trust in students that had been educated in “external universities” was next to impossible.

There was also another reason, one that most would not speak of, but was greatly opposed by within the Imperial Army.

In the past, the “gunto gumi” [6], elite graduates from military academies and universities would often be appointed as accompanying military attachés in Japanese embassies worldwide. The term of office was usually two years, even the longest terms never exceeded five. Once the term was completed in foreign land, most of them would be transferred back to General Staff

Headquarters.

It can be said that it was the optimal shortcut to success.

—Should a spy training agency be established, would we lose the possibility of serving as military attachés?

Their concern about the matter could not be denied.

No matter how they proudly declared themselves as “the great Imperial Japanese Army”, the military was a form of bureaucracy, hence, protecting their vested interest with great effort still remains as the inevitable result of organization.

The disputes that followed caused by the “seniors” at a later date were unknown to the lower ranks.

Colonel Mutou had summoned Sakuma and transferred him to the “office for preparation of affairs established for the facility of development of intelligence service officials” a year and a half prior. His assignment had been to become a liaison between the agency and General Staff Headquarters.

It seemed that the higher ranks of the Imperial Army had allowed Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki to establish a “spy training agency” (the name that was recorded on the documents had been the “D-Agency”) upon the condition of having the Lieutenant Colonel to accept men sent from General Staff Headquarters.

To soldiers, orders from higher ranks were absolute and were to be obeyed without question no matter what.

Sakuma, who had not questioned the orders he had received, prepared himself to leave for the destination of his assignment. However, Colonel Mutou, whom had issued those orders, stopped him with a straight face.

“Do you own a business suit?”

“A business suit?” Sakuma could not help but ask.

“If you don’t, go and get one. Also, don’t be in such a hurry to go,

he ordered ‘He’s not coming until his hair grows back.’ ”

The Colonel had raised his head from the pile of documents that was on his desk and glanced at Sakuma’s head.

No one had to look twice to know. Professional soldiers always sport closely cut hair.

“Those were his requirements. He said ‘We are a spy training agency. No one comes and goes in a military uniform or a crew cut, no matter who they are.’ In other words, you’re not going anywhere until you’ve grown out your hair and find a suit. For the time being, just stay at home and be on standby.”

Colonel Mutou had risen from his seat, leant across his desk and faced Sakuma, who stood at attention. The Colonel lowered his voice, breath reeking of alcohol.

“You listen carefully, if they make any mistakes, report back to me immediately. I don’t care how small the slip-up is, if they mess up, they’re finished, but if they don’t…”

—You would understand the rest!

The near-silent threat echoed in Sakuma’s ears.

“Captain Sakuma!”

Sakuma turned his head to see a member of the military police three steps before him, saluting.

“The team has finished setting up everything inside the house, the investigation can be carried out any time.”

“Hm.” Sakuma let out a low hum, and turned once again to face Miyoshi, who stood behind him. The latter still wore his cap low, expression completely concealed. His complexion was pale, with lips far too red for a man, corners curled up into a sneer.

Sakuma shifted his gaze back to the scene in front of him. The man

who had saluted him, now waiting for his orders, had too, wore his cap low. Let alone his expression, Sakuma could not even identify him.

—That one's Hatano…no, or is he Kaminaga?

Sakuma gritted his teeth, fighting back the urge to ask who he was.

"…begin."

At Sakuma's command, the military police, ready at their positions, immediately began the search.

The men dispersed to their assigned locations. Drawers and cabinets were opened, the contents thrown out; the closet and attic were searched; sliding doors were flung open…

"Oh, why are you like this! This is my home. That's mine! It's wrong to damage others' things without authorization you know!"

Gordon instantly protested in an exaggerated manner.

The men disregarded his protests. Gordon flushed with anger, and began to speak rapidly in English.

After a while, Sakuma heard a low voice whispering by his ear.

"…I'm absolutely against…the Japanese military police…destroying my belongings of their own accord…even if the man responsible for this performs "hara-kiri" it's still unforgivable…I'm going to protest to the embassy…must make it an international issue…"

Miyoshi interpreted Gordon's rapid words one after another.

Sakuma had known before the investigation that his "target" would speak rapidly in English if agitated, and for that reason he had brought Miyoshi as an interpreter, however…

—So noisy.

Sakuma could not help but furrow his brows.

Even without an interpreter, he understood Gordon's English.

Listening to the grumbling twice in both English and Japanese only made it more agonizing.

Even so, he could not display emotion at the moment.

Despite his impatience, Sakuma did not forget to observe the surrounding area.

There were eleven men at the scene in the military police uniform, hats worn low, skillfully and persistently investigating the residence.

Even to Sakuma, it seemed like they were serious about the investigation.

No one would suspect them as masquerading military police, right?

(These monsters…)

He swallowed the insult that had made its way to the tip of his tongue, bitterness seeping into his heart.

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Sakuma had witnessed everything since the selection test of the first batch of students of the spy training facility — the first examinees for the "D-Agency".

The exam had been a strange one.

For example, some had been asked the total number steps and stairs they had walked since entering the building.

Others were required to unfurl a map of the world, and point out the location of the island of Saipan, which had been skillfully removed from the map by the examiner beforehand. Should the examinee succeed in pointing this out, they would then be asked what had been put between the map and the desk.

Another test had required examinees read out meaningless
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sentences, and then ask them to recite said sentences backwards after a period of time.

In Sakuma's eyes, those tests were simply "ridiculous", for he had thought no one would be able to handle the questions.

But surprisingly, most examinees had nonchalantly provided correct answers when faced with these baffling (and on some levels, quite ridiculous) questions.

Those who had been able to correctly answer the number of steps and stairs they had walked had even pointed out, without the inquiries from the examiner, the number of windows in the corridors along the way, whether they were opened or closed, and whether they were cracked.

Among those who had been asked what was put between the map and the desk, all had not only correctly listed out the ten items — including an inkwell, a book, a teacup, two pens, matches, an ashtray… but had also accurately stated the title of the book that was displayed on the spine, and even the brand of a half-finished cigarette.

As for the examinee who had been required to recite the meaningless sentences backwards, they too, had succeeded without a single error.

Sakuma, who had a fair amount of confidence in his observation and memorizing skills, had graduated from the Academy with flying colours, and was considered to be an "elite"; yet, he could only describe the abilities of the examinees as "unusual".

—Who are these people? Where have they been before this?

Sakuma's questions were immediately ricocheted off of a high wall.

The histories of the examinees, even their names and ages were all treated as "top secret information".

Judging from their clothing and attitude, none of the candidates were graduates of military academies. They seemed to be graduates of normal institutes such as the Imperial Universities located in

Tokyo or Kyoto, Waseda University and Keio University. They all looked like young men who grew up in more than pleasant environments, and who never had it rough. Sakuma even heard that many of the examinees were sons of professors, generals, and government officials, or students who had studied overseas.

About ten students were selected from the candidates, by the unknown standards of Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki.

The chosen ones lived together, and received their training.

However, their training facility was hardly remarkable. It was an old two-storey building, located behind the headquarters of the Patriotic Women's Association in Kudanshita [1]. The building would remind one of an elementary school in the countryside, with remnants of paint peeling of the walls. A small wooden sign was peculiarly hung at the quaint entrance, which read "Greater East Asia Cultural Society".

As a training agency for "prospecting agents", it really was far too modest.

When Sakuma first visited the building, he had even thought "Perhaps the building itself is a disguise, just like a spy." However, after the truth was revealed, it was not that complicated — they simply lacked the funds.

The Imperial Army seemed to show a great amount of disdain towards the establishment of the training facility, and hence reduced the original budget. The building had been hastily reconstructed from an old dovecote formerly used by the military.

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People came and went one after another, until only twelve students remained.

—No, twelve monsters.

That was the only remark Sakuma had for them after observing their training throughout the entire year.
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The training in the D-Agency was full of diversity.

For example, the students had been instructed on using explosives and wireless signals, the operation of automobiles and planes, as well as learning various languages and dialects. They had received lectures from professors of reknowned universities on organizational theories, religious studies and international political theories. Lessons on medical science, pharmacy, psychology, physics, chemistry and biology were also given.

Abstruse discussions about ideologists and strategists such as Sun Tzu, Kant, Hegel, Clausewitz, Hobbes, and more that Sakuma hadn't even heard of, often happened between students. On the other hand, professional thieves and safe-crackers had been brought out of prison to instruct the trainees on the techniques and methods. Aside from being taught on how to pick a lock using a single wire, the students also received lessons on how to secretly switch items by sleight of hand as a magician would, dance and billiards techniques. Kabuki actresses had been hired to teach the students the art of disguise, while professional gigolos demonstrated how to seduce women.

All students had been required to swim in cold water while clothed, then travel to a location far away without sleep, and use complex ciphers, memorized only a day beforehand, fluently and naturally as the languages they usually speak.

The D-Agency had even trained them to be able to disassemble shortwave radios in complete darkness, and put them back together so that they were once again functional, relying solely on their fingertips. The students had also been ordered to seamlessly open envelopes with a bamboo stick, and instantly memorize words which had been written backwards and reflected in a mirror. Letters containing orders, no matter how complicated they are, were to be destroyed on the spot after they had been read; the students had also been trained to recover destroyed letters.

The students had all easily completed the training exercises that pushed them to their mental and physical limits.

But that was not all.

Even after undergoing such demanding and unimaginable tasks, these students often frequent the streets at night. There was no curfew in the dormitories provided, and deciding whether to go out at night was of the students' personal choice.

Sakuma had always felt slightly bitter as he watched the students go out in groups at night.

—Everything here is completely different from the military academy I graduated from.

Despite having said that, Sakuma did not envy the students at all.

To Sakuma, his classmates at the military academy were like brothers to him. They had endured harsh treatment from instructors and seniors together — if someone made a mistake, the rest of the class would be more than willing to accept their punishment along with them. When they returned to the dormitories after harsh training, everyone wore their hearts on their sleeves and talked about anything and everything. Words of encouragement were offered to the discouraged, hot tears were shed, and vows to dedicate themselves to serve and protect the country were exchanged.

Even now, Sakuma could still instantly recall a few of their faces. "I'd gladly give my life to save one of theirs." was the thought he still held on to. On certain levels, they had been even closer than brothers related by blood — they were brothers who ate from the same pot and endured everything together.

But the students here…

Miyoshi, Kaminaga, Odagiri, Amari, Hatano, Jitsui — Sakuma knew these were all pseudonyms. Even though they also ate from the same pot, they referred to each other by their false names, and should anyone ask, they replied with their false history prepared by the D-Agency. Despite having undergone harsh training together, they never knew each other's real names.

—How can they stand living like this?

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Sakuma had passed by the dining hall on a certain night, and abruptly stopped his footsteps.

All the students were unusually gathered in the hall, discussing a topic of a sort. When Sakuma listened closely, he visibly paled.

—Does Japan really need “Tennosei”? [2.1]

Sakuma had flung the doors open without warning in the hope of cutting off the question the speaker had raised.

“You bastards!”

A few students had slowly turned to look at him, all appearing to be at ease. Surprisingly, none of them looked as though they were under the effects of alcohol.

“What kind of nonsense are all of you raving about…going so far as saying these outrageous things…”

Sakuma burned with rage that had rendered him speechless.

Everyone had looked at him with obvious disappointment.

“We’re only discussing its possibility.” Miyoshi, who had been at the scene, said, “We were just trying to prove the orthodoxy and legality of it all.”

—Orthodoxy?

Sakuma was stunned.

He had almost stood at attention out of reflex, fortunately he held back, albeit with extreme difficulty.

In the military, it was common knowledge to stand at attention when the word “Tenno” [2.2] was mentioned. Should anyone be careless and remain standing at ease, they would be rewarded with a slap to the face, or even be sentenced to solitary confinement, a punishment no one dared complain about. However, if one stands
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at attention upon hearing the title of the Emperor in the agency, they would be penalized.

“Only a soldier would immediately stand at attention when the “Tenno” is mentioned.”

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had explained the rules of the agency in an extremely cold voice on the day Sakuma came to report for duty.

“Even if they’re in suits and grow out their hair, if they react in such a way that allows others to understand that ‘I am a soldier’ upon hearing the word ‘Tenno’, I do not want them here. That is why I set the penalty.”

The Lieutenant Colonel smirked.

“But to be honest, since the higher-ups in the military can’t stand the sight of me, I don’t have much of a budget. As you can see, we are a poor unit, so I plan to utilize your penalty fees in other fields.”

Sakuma had indeed paid quite an amount of fees on several occasions.

No, in comparison to the penalty, what irritated Sakuma even more was the taunting glances the students gave him whenever he had to pay.

—That’s just pure reflex isn’t it? How are you even unable to control your own reactions?

Someone had even said that to him in astonishment.

Recently, he finally had been able to abstain from standing at attention when the title of the Emperor was mentioned. Yet…

This is another matter altogether.

Sakuma had paused for a while, then asked, “So as to say, you’re all discussing the orthodoxy of the arahitogami, His Majesty the Emperor, correct?” [3]

“And his legality.”

He saw a student with a pale complexion nod nonchalantly.

“As the countries in Asia now don’t support the particularities shown in imperialism, I propose that we return to the “Tenno kikansetsu” promoted by Professor Minobe [4], reconstructing from the very basic principles. What do you think, Sakuma-san…”

“You get down on your knees right now!”

Sakuma had roared before he knew it. He reached for his sword at his waist, teeth gnashing in rage and at the realization that he was in a suit, not a military uniform.

“Don’t be so dramatic, come and discuss the matter with us.”

“You son of a bitch, I have nothing to discuss with all of you! I’ll report this back to General Staff Headquarters, and let them decide on your punishment. You’d better be prepared to die!” Sakuma snarled.

A shadow silently had appeared from behind him.

The shadow donned a white glove, his tilted body supported by a cane.

“What’s going on?” Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki asked, glancing at everyone in the room.

Miyoshi explained what had happened with evident distaste.

The Lieutenant Colonel raised his hand, waved slightly and said, “Do continue.”

“How is this happening…”

Sakuma was speechless.

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki turned to him and said, “You said that the Emperor was a living god? The Japanese really are good at saying these things, the title has only been of use in the recent decade. Before the Meiji era, people outside of Kyoto had already forgotten about the existence of the Emperor. It must be troubling to him too,

to be suddenly treated and worshipped as a 'living god.'"

"You…"

"It's your freedom to choose what you believe in. Whether it be Christ, Muhammad, or even a sardine's head, believe in all you want. If that is what you truly choose to believe in after thinking it through clearly, then so be it."

Sakuma had felt breathless from the sheer shock of it all.

If any of this had been said "outside", they would have been immediately arrested for treason and heresy.

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki smiled slightly, and continued.

"Do not forget, this is a spy training facility. After the students leave, they'll be scattered all over the world, where they will have to make themselves 'invisible'. They're unlike the carefree military attachés that accompany diplomats and stay for a few years overseas before returning back to the country. They have to stay in foreign land for ten years, twenty years… perhaps even longer, to be immersed in the local culture, becoming a truly "invisible" man, collecting intelligence and report back to Japan. No one can learn of their identity, and should the tables turn, there will be no one to turn to for discussion. Once a spy's identity has been exposed, or is seen through by the enemy, the mission would be regarded as a failure, and to avoid missions from becoming a failure, there must not be a single moment of uncertainty. Can you imagine what their lives will be like?"

Sakuma had not been able to think of an answer, the Lieutenant Colonel then cast his gaze at the students towards the students in the hall.

"Only pitch-black solitude and trepidation awaits you in the future. Soon, you may even doubt your existence. Then, everything you thought you knew, knowledge sustained by the outside world, will crumble before you as time goes by like a sandcastle. By then, many will have given up their missions, be discovered by their enemies, ally with the enemy, or be driven to insanity."

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki paused for a while, and asked Sakuma.

“If you were a spy whose secret has been discovered by the enemy, what would you do?”

“Then I would have to kill the enemy, or myself.” Sakuma declared, head held high.

The Bushido had always been accustomed to life and death.

To value honour above all else.

To die a valiant death was the honour of a musha. [5]

This had been engrained into the minds of all at the very beginning in the army. Kill the enemy or commit suicide. There is no, and nor should there be another choice…

Yet the students in the dining hall laughed upon hearing Sakuma’s answer, leaving him perplexed.

“For a spy, to kill or commit suicide are the worst decisions they can make.” The Lieutenant Colonel shook his head.

—Murder and suicide… the worst choices?

Isn’t the army formed by people who are able to accept murder and suicide?

“I don’t… understand what you’re trying to say.”

“A spy’s purpose is to bring intelligence from the enemy back to their country to promote international relations.”

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had retained his expression.

“On the other hand, whether it be personal or societal, death is inevitable. If someone dies on an ordinary occasion, the police of their country will undoubtedly investigate, and the distinctive trait of police organizations is that they don’t give up until all mysteries and secrets are solved and exposed. That may completely render the outcome of a mission completely useless… Obviously, a spy who

kills or commits suicide will only attract further investigation, a meaningless and stupid action."

—Suicide… a meaningless and stupid action?

Sakuma felt blood rushing to his head.

"Those are the thoughts of cowards who fear death!" He had shouted without thinking.

"I still think spies are a despicable presence."

A smile flickered across the Lieutenant Colonel's eyes.

"Then let me ask you this: If you commit suicide, what happens next?"

"If I were to die…"

Sakuma had thought about it for a while, and said, "I will hold my head high and reunite with my former comrades at the Yasukuni Jinja." [6]

"Ah, so you'll die to proudly meet your comrades at the shrine? What if you don't see them?"

"There is no way that I couldn't."

"And why is that?"

"Those who bravely sacrifice themselves for the country are commemorated at the Yasukuni Jinja."

"I see."

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki nodded, and turned to the students.

"Miyoshi, what do you think?"

"Even going to the extent of repeating yourself again, what a powerful sardine's head, with such thorough tuning…" [7]

Miyoshi had glanced at Sakuma and shrugged.

“It’s just like a newly rising religion. Once they leave the confines of the isolated group, their ideas won’t last for long.” Miyoshi said as he calmly observed Sakuma’s reactions, the glint in his eyes not unlike that of a mouse being fed new feed.

“How about you, Kaminaga?” the Lieutenant Colonel asked.

“I agree with Miyoshi. For example, when Japan loses the war in the future, the people will promptly put their faith in the complete opposite.”

(Going to the extent of saying Japan being defeated…)

This had stunned Sakuma to the core, leaving him speechless.

What were these people thinking? What is wrong with their minds?

“Money, honour, patriotism, even death are mere illusory things.”

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had ignored the dazed Sakuma, and spoke to everyone.

“Only pitch-black solitude awaits you. The things that support you are not the illusions from the outside world. To successfully carry out a mission, you will only need the ability to make decisions under the ever-changing circumstances, that is, a mind that can be relied on in any situation… Whether the “Tennosei” is right or wrong, it is an excellent question. Discuss it to your hearts’ content.”

And with that, the Lieutenant Colonel left the hall like a shadow, leaning onto his cane.

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Sakuma felt a surge of bitterness at the memory of that conversation as he glanced at the fake military police before him, who were going around in the house looking for evidence.

(They didn’t even become spies for honour or out of patriotism.)

At this, a feeling of disgust welled up in his chest.
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But can someone really do these things? To not love anyone in the entirety of their lives, to not believe in anything, is there a way to live like this?

In the end, the true motive that pushes them is…

—If it were me, I would definitely be able do it.

This borderline terrifying sense of pride.

To Sakuma, only heartless, emotionless people are able to live such a life.

Two days ago, after Sakuma had relayed the orders he had received from General Staff Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had unexpectedly smiled.

“They want us to investigate this man?” Sakuma had handed him the file containing John Gordon’s information, which had been cast aside on the desk by the Lieutenant Colonel after he had had a quick glance.

“Give me a reason.”

“As I had stated, the target is suspected of espionage.” Sakuma had no choice but to explain once more.

“Colonel Mutou expects the school to bring back irrefutable evidence to confirm of the target’s guilt.”

“Evidence? What a fool, why would we bother to looking for it?” The Lieutenant Colonel had muttered.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Even if we don’t look for evidence, if we just leave him alone, he’ll vanish soon enough.”

—Vanish on his own?

Sakuma had thought he had misheard the Lieutenant Colonel.

“It is possible that Gordon had taken covert photographs of cryptographic ciphers of the Imperial Japanese Army, and suspicions are high. You just said he’ll disappear on his own? Meaning that we should ‘set him free’?”

“Once a spy is suspected, they’re finished. What purpose is left of an exposed spy? What use is there to arrest an enemy with the likes of a crippled soldier now?”

“That may be right, but…” Sakuma was at a sudden loss of words, but quickly retaliated, “If we arrest him, and carry out further interrogation, we might be able to force him to reveal who else is involved in the disclosure of the ciphers, carry out investigations on unknown personnel who are also involved.”

“Judging from his behaviour, this is an individual crime. Even if we arrest him, we won’t get anything out of him.”

“As of now, the General Staff Headquarters are not only demanding training from this school, they also want actual results.” Sakuma inevitably had to speak of the truth.

“Colonel Mutou had said ‘This is a good chance, we must bring back evidence.’ In other words, this is an official mission for the D-Agency.”

“What a meaningless mission.”

“Regardless, orders are orders.”

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had stared at the persistent Sakuma with uninterested eyes.

“Understood. All we need to do is to bring back evidence, right?” The Lieutenant Colonel had said, face expressionless.

He summoned one of the students, one of the firsts to enroll in the “D-Agency” — Second Lieutenant Miyoshi.

Miyoshi stood before Sakuma, and read the reports concerning

Gordon at an alarming speed, then returned them and said, “Well, how should we go about it?”

“Disguise yourselves as the military police, and raid the house.” Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had said nonchalantly. “”Miyoshi, you’ll take command at the scene. As soon as you obtain evidence, leave immediately. You’ll have about forty minutes before the real military police arrive and start a commotion. Can you do it?”

“Thirty minutes will be suffice.” Miyoshi offhandedly shrugged, and turned to Sakuma. “I would also like to invite Sakuma-san to take up the role of the captain.”

“Me as the captain?” Sakuma had blinked in surprised at Miyoshi’s words. “Aren’t you supposed to be taking charge?”

“I shall accompany you as an interpreter. Judging from the information provided, this would be the best way to speak directly to the target.”

“But…”

“If it were the real military police, it would seem unnatural to not bring along an interpreter upon entering the property of a foreigner. There is no way they would be able to understand foreign languages.”

Having heard such, Sakuma had nothing retort.

“Then we’ll move out at 0800 in two days. I’ll inform everyone else.”

Miyoshi had said this casually, and prepared to leave just as Sakuma hurriedly called after him.

“What if we do find any evidence after the raid?”

Miyoshi looked at him in surprise.

“…There’s probably proof isn’t there?”

Miyoshi grinned, much like a cat in a fairytale, and disappeared

behind the door.

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The day of the mission had come.

The students of the D-Agency had disguised themselves as a military police unit as planned, and raided the target's residence.

John Gordon had initially strongly denied the entry of the military police.

"I haven't done anything wrong. I clearly haven't done anything wrong, so why are you investigating my home? I cannot accept this!" The tall American exclaimed loudly, blocking the door.

They had wanted to force their way inside, but Gordon stood proud, arms spread, not allowing the men before him to enter.

Gordon was a full head taller than those who were surrounding him. His face was red in anger, making him seem like an aka-oni. [1] If the unit forced their way in, it would certainly cause an uproar and attract attention. In truth, some of the neighbours had already looked out from their front doors to witness the unexpected commotion.

—There isn't time for this stalling.

Just when Sakuma was beginning to feel anxious, Gordon had suddenly spouted an odd stream of words.

"You guys better not overdo it…It'd be once if it were only once… But twice is simply unforgivable!"

—What? What did he just say?

Sakuma quizzically turned to Miyoshi.

Miyoshi, seemingly interpreting Sakuma's enquiry, whispered some words to the target in a low voice.

Gordon, who had been stone-faced and adamantly refusing their
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entry, suddenly widened his eyes and laughed, clapping his hands.

“Oh, I understand now, you’ve really got the guts to say something like that. An impressive amount of courage, Japanese samurai do as they say, yes?”

Sakuma had been shocked at the abrupt change in his behaviour.

“What happened? What did you say to him?”

Miyoshi said calmly,”I told him ‘If we don’t find any evidence after our investigation, the captain will perform hara-kiri on the spot.’”

“What…”

Sakuma was speechless. He had heard none of this before the investigation.

The American technician, John Gordon smirked, and moved aside from his doorway.

“I love Japanese culture! So far I’ve seen geishas and Mount Fuji. All that’s left is a hara-kiri show. I look forward to your performance, now if you’ll please!”

Sakuma could only mentally prepare himself.

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“Go!” Sakuma commanded in a low voice.

The fake military police rushed into the house upon his words.

“Are you okay, Captain-san? You don’t look so good.” Gordon said to Sakuma. “Are your subordinates still going to continue searching my house? You’re not going to find anything no matter how hard you look.”

He was still as confident as he had been.

—What is he planning to do after all of this?

Miyoshi, who was acting as the commander at the scene, has his
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face blank and expressionless as always, and stood motionless. Could it be…

Sakuma suddenly thought of a certain possibility, gritting his teeth.

(Did I draw the Joker again…)

Just like that time…

That had been about half a year ago.

Sakuma had found the students gathered in the dining hall playing poker, and immediately willingly joined. To be frank, Sakuma had not had any other interests, poker was his only hobby.

He was quite confident in his skills.

However, Sakuma had not won once after a few rounds.

It hadn't been because of receiving poor hands.

Everytime Sakuma received a good hand, the others would lower their bets; on the contrary, whenever he received a poor hand, the rest would increase their amount. Occasionally, when he had a good hand, and raised his bet, someone else would present an even better hand than his own.

Despite the constant rotation of opponents at the table, Sakuma still lost incessantly.

—It can't be helped, sometimes it's just a matter of tough luck.

Sakuma shrugged, and emptied his pockets, placing all his money onto the card table, and it was then the students had apologetically explained the mystery behind it all.

They had all been acting in collusion.

The person who stood behind Sakuma would peek at his cards, and signal the ones at the table.

Sakuma had been dumbfounded at this.

He had not even considered the word ‘pathetic’ due to the sheer shock of it all.

“What fun is there when you cheat to win?” Sakuma had retorted in a low voice, and the students looked at one another.

“We weren’t playing poker.”

“What? Then what were you doing?”

“We call it the ‘Joker Game’…”

“Joker Game?”

“And so as to say…”

They had then explained the intriguing game.

The game at the table is a mere charade. The players would consider the ones who come and go from the dining hall as their allies, who would then peek at the opponents’ hands, and signal the players; however, there is no telling whose side one another stood at. The signals from the so-called allies may be false, the players themselves may also be able to see through the signs and change their hand, or convince the opposing spy to betray their side and join yours. Besides these, there still seemed to be a number of complicated rules, but Sakuma had not been able to understand.

“Why must the rules be so complicated?”

“They’re not actually that complicated,” a student replied with a shrug. “It’s just like international politics.”

“International politics?”

“Please picture the table as a stage for an international political meeting,” another butted in. “If your intelligence is leaked, you certainly will not be able to win the game. It’s just like the state of Japan a few years ago, when a meeting was held in London regarding the reduction of armaments. [2] The players of different countries sitting at the negotiating table had already obtained every single piece of intel, and knew the extent of how much Japan was

willing to yield. How is it possible to win in a game like this? Yes, metaphorically, at that time, the Japanese diplomatic corps were just like you, voluntarily joining the game without knowing the rules."

The students had looked at one another at the end of the speech, and burst out in laughter.

Since then, Sakuma had not neared the students even if he saw them playing poker.

What rules are they playing by? What sort of game are they playing this time?

One would never be able to pick up hints of any sort just by watching them.

But Sakuma was sure of a single matter at the very least.

—To these people, everything is merely a game.

Perhaps risking their lives to carry out missions are just "interesting games" that are hard to come across to them.

Nihilists that trust no one else but themselves.

Ruthless.

Every single one of them are monsters.

The future of the country absolutely cannot be trusted to be in the hands of these mysterious, shady bastards.

The mission to be carried out, ordered by General Staff Headquarters, is probably an excuse to thwart the agency.

It would be a pleasure if they find concrete evidence, and prove that John Gordon is indeed a spy sent from America. The students of the D-Agency would be able to fully experience the fear of "we could be arrested just like this in the future", and understand that this is reality, not a game.

On the other hand, if they do not manage to find evidence, it is possible for the General Staff Headquarters to denounce the D-Agency and its dysfunctionality, and single-handedly destroy the agency. However…

The students, who were in fake military police uniforms, had completed the search in the house, and returned one after another to report before Sakuma.

“Kitchen, clear!”

“Yard, clear!”

“Closets, clear!”

“Attic, clear!”

Sakuma remained quiet and walked towards the house in strides after he had heard the reports, and inspected the house that is now properly tidied up. He had to admit, the students had had deftly and thoroughly searched the house.

—There wasn’t any evidence to be found in the first place.

Gordon, who had been following behind Sakuma wherever he went, eagerly said with a gleeful face, “What’s the matter, Captain-san? Is it show time now?”

Sakuma stopped.

Am I the one who ended up drawing the Joker again?

Sakuma closed his eyes, having mentally prepared himself.

—Well, if this is it, then there’s no other choice. I’ll do my best for all of you.

He opened his eyes, and took a final glance behind him.

A small smile formed at the lowered brim of Miyoshi’s cap.

“You said you found evidence?”

Colonel Mutou sat in a chair behind his desk, shock evident on his turgid face after listening to Sakuma’s report.

“How….there’s no way…”

“Sir, you had not told me that it was the second investigation,” Sakuma said while standing at attention. His line of sight had been fixated on a spot above the Colonel’s head, upon the wall during his entire report.

“What?”

Mutou had stared at Sakuma, seemingly surprised at his initiative in speaking.

“What did you just say?”

“Sir, you had personally gave the order ‘deploy the D-Agency to investigate John Gordon, the American spy’ a few days ago, however, I had not heard you mention the fact that a military police unit had already searched Gordon’s house.”

“That goes without saying!”

Mutou resembled a bulldog, his jowls trembling as he bellowed.

“You listen right now. You are nothing more than a liaison between us and those people. Am I supposed to explain everything to you in detail? Don’t flatter yourself!”

Sakuma stood silently through the other’s paroxysm of rage. After all, a professional soldier should never talk back to their superior officers.

“That doesn’t matter. Now tell me where the evidence was hidden!” Colonel Mutou demanded.

Sakuma replied with a short and firm “yes, sir”, and proceeded to tell the man the answer. The Colonel’s face was drained of all colour upon hearing it.

“Something like that actually happened…Don’t tell me that you too had…”

“No, sir, I never laid a finger on it.”

Mutou had only then let out a sigh of relief.

“Well, where’s the microfilm you found?”

“I did not bring back the evidence, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“I merely confirmed its presence, and did not bring it back.”

“What do you mean?”

“I intentionally allowed the contents of the microfilm to be leaked.”

“To think that you did such a stupid thing…”

Colonel Mutou glared at Sakuma, revealing bloodshot eyes under his thick eyebrows.

“Then…that’s what it was. The microfilm you found didn’t contain any photos of army crypto ciphers, yes?”

“No, sir. It’s exactly as you had said.”

“What kind of imbecile like you would intentionally hand information over to the enemy in a case like this?”

The Colonel slammed his fist on the desk. His roar had been so loud it certainly had made itself audible to the entire General Staff Headquarters. Flashes of fear flitted across the faces of those surrounding them, but Sakuma stood firm like a mountain as he always had, and said,

“Now that we have confirmed what codes were taken, no harm would come if the encryption is to be changed. Moreover, it would benefit our own communications to let the enemy use the already meaningless ciphers.”

“What? Well, it seems to be right if it’s being said that way, but…”

Colonel Mutou waved his hand at the ones who had been staring at them as if he were swatting away flies.

“What about the spy?” He lowered his voice and asked. “You’re not letting him go as well, are you?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki is currently keeping Gordon under custody to be used as teaching material.”

“Teaching material?”

The Colonel let out an odd shriek, blinking rapidly.

“Yes, sir. Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki said that he will ‘make Gordon a double agent’.”

Colonel Mutou snarled after a short pause, his face an angry red.

“Damn that son of a bitch Yuuki! Now with things as they are that means he not only has the man, but also the evidence and the credit! What does he mean by ‘teaching material’? Fuck, who does he think he is? I’m not a toy for him to play with!”

Sakuma still stood at attention until the Colonel had finished his rant, then said,

“It appears that I have something you have forgotten, sir.”

“Something that I’ve forgotten?”

Colonel Mutou was in disbelief as he took the cigarette case Sakuma had handed him.

“This is indeed mine….where did you find it?”

“Apparently it was left in the corridors of ‘Hanabishi’.”

“Hanabishi?”

The Colonel squinted his eyes in surprise.

“What were you doing at Hanabishi?”

“Please allow me to report this in a private manner,” Sakuma said before walking around the desk to Colonel Mutou, speaking lowly beside his ear.

“Revealing the details of a military police investigation in the residence of a suspected spy is also considered as leaking confidential military intelligence, even if the person whom you spoke to is a geisha you are familiar with, sir.”

Sakuma then returned to his original position, and once again stood at attention.

“Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki has stated that he ‘will not disclose the incident to the public’. End of report!”

The Colonel remained silent for a while, blood draining from his face completely. He seemed to be glaring dangerously at Sakuma throughout the entire time, but the latter had been focusing on a spot on the wall, refusing to make eye contact.

After a while, the Colonel gnashed his teeth and growled.

“…since when did you get on their side?”

Sakuma smiled.

—Aren’t you the one who betrayed me first?

Those words had surfaced to his mind.

Once John Gordon was suspected of espionage, Colonel Mutou had personally led a military police unit to the spy’s house to investigate. The Colonel rarely left his desk, and for him to personally arrive on site had confirmed the credibility of the suspicion.

Under the command of Colonel Mutou, the unit had entered Gordon’s house by force and carried out a thorough investigation.

And yet to no avail.

Gordon had then said to the stunned Colonel Mutou, “You’re illegally searching the house of a civilian, I’ll have to make an official complaint through the embassy.”

The Colonel had not known whether Gordon had really meant it.

No, since it is known that Gordon is a spy, it is probable that he does not want to turn this incident into a bigger deal as it is, but Colonel Mutou had been deeply unnerved by Gordon’s words. If Gordon does decide to do so, it would tarnish the record he had worked so hard to earn. Promotions in the future would seem impossible…

In desperation, the Colonel had devised a plan.

He would be able to cover up his own failure by having someone else repeat the same mistake. Yes, having someone else fail at the same task would be enough to solve this.

Even if Gordon does protest to the embassy, he would be more likely to emphasize and exaggerate on the second illegal search in comparison to the first one.

—Let the D-Agency do it.

It had only been natural for the Colonel to come up with a plan like this.

If the spy agency that had always been isolated by the army, in other words, the D-Agency, had failed in the second investigation, then the Colonel’s own mistake would not stand out too much. Furthermore, if he used this as a chance to point out the error made by the D-Agency and disparage them, then his mistake would not matter much in the end.

A plan that would kill two birds with one stone.

Colonel Mutou had smiled at the thought of his plan.

However, the plan had required a person to act as a sacrifice. A third person who could accurately relay the order without knowing his intentions, a pawn that can be sacrificed at any time.

—And that would be me.

The order had been a verbal one, and lacked proof. Should questions arise in the future, Colonel Mutou would certainly plan to insist that he “had never issued such an order” and play dumb, erasing all traces of evidence.

Sakuma gritted his teeth, barely suppressing the mocking expression that had threatened to show on his face.

“I had merely followed your orders and acted as a liaison, sir.”

Sakuma struggled to maintain his expressionless façade.

Colonel Mutou glared murderously at Sakuma as though he had killed his father.

“…you are dismissed.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said you are dismissed!”

“Understood, sir. First Lieutenant Sakuma hereby takes his leave.”

Sakuma aligned his feet and saluted.

He turned to leave, and the sound of someone delivering an aggressive kick to the desk followed.

Sakuma trudged through the dimly lit hallways of the General Staff Headquarters, out of the building, and was met with sakura blossoms in full bloom.

High walls had been constructed to surround the Headquarters, blocking the line of vision of common civilians, but the blossoming sakura trees had always managed to overthrow the walls and extend their branches outwards.

Sakuma closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

—The seasons are unconcerned with the actions of humans, rotating endlessly.

His body had deeply experienced this inevitable truth.

Sakuma abruptly regained his senses, and found his shadow moving on its own.

He was shocked, and swallowed the breath he had intended to take.

That is not a shadow.

A white leather glove, a cane that is leaned against, a dragging left foot, a stiff gait.

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki silently approached Sakuma from the back, and walked past him.

Sakuma lightly shook his head, uttered not a single word, and walked side by side with the shadow that had been ahead of him.

The Lieutenant Colonel turned a blind eye towards Sakuma, who was by his side, looking straight on.

Sakuma cast a glance at the Lieutenant Colonel's shadow-like silhouette.

—Thinking carefully, that incident had been very strange right from the beginning.

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had always said "spies are invisible", yet, he had deliberately let the supposedly "invisible" students of the D-Agency form an eye-catching military police unit, and enter the house in broad daylight.

Why so?

To carry out the operational plan, it is necessary to deploy a fake military police unit.

The military police had already searched the residence of the target, John Gordon. The information that had stated that Gordon was a

spy was highly accurate, even Colonel Mutou had personally engaged himself in the mission, but the military had not been able to find any evidence.

This time, when the military police demanded to search the house again, Gordon had completely disregarded them, thinking:

—It's just the same, the military police are here again to search the place, they won't find anything.

And so he let his guard down.

Even if it's the second time the house was being illegally searched, Gordon had merely resisted in a half-hearted manner, and went to the extent of personally inviting the military police unit into the house. After the investigation had started, he had only verbally expressed his discontent, and had not interfered with the investigation or stealthily moved the evidence to another place. When the D-Agency had found the evidence before him, he had fallen into the dilemma of having to attend a fair hearing.

However…

The military police unit had indeed carried out a thorough search.

The "notorious" military police had performed an extensive blanket search.

Therefore, when the students of the D-Agency, disguised as the military, carried out their investigation, it had only been an act. They had no intention of searching the house from the beginning, and had only planned to search "the place where the real military police would never touch".

The place where the real military police would never touch.

—It is confirmed that he prays before the portraits of the royal couple day and night.

Gordon had attached the microfilm to the back of the imperial portrait of His Majesty the Emperor.

It is absolutely prohibited to directly touch the portrait of the Emperor during this period of time. An article taken from a newspaper some days ago had reported that the head teacher of an elementary school had had carelessly touched the imperial portrait, and was harshly criticized by the public, eventually committing suicide. The commentary from the report had naturally also expressed a similar view.

This psychological constraint on the investigating military police had formed an “invisible place” to their eyes.

On the other hand, even if Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki, whom had nonchalantly allowed the students to discuss about the orthodoxy of imperialism, had never seen the site in person, he understood the mystery within.

—Sakuma had been able to understand up to this point.

But to be able to carry out the plan, the Lieutenant Colonel must first be able to learn about the investigation the military police had performed at Gordon’s house beforehand.

Sakuma looked ahead of him, and asked the man that was walking silently beside him like a shadow.

“That cane of yours is a disguise as well, isn’t it?”

“You’ve been investigating?”

The shadow seemed to chuckle slightly from the depths of his throat.

Sakuma lightly lowered his chin, almost hiding his actions.

The day Sakuma had been summoned to General Staff Headquarters to receive orders for the investigation of Gordon, it had only took him one look to know that Colonel Mutou had been hungover again. He must have had been drinking at someplace during the night before. At this, Sakuma immediately thought of a possibility, and went about to visit the inns the Colonel had brought him to.

The mistress of “Hanabishi” had been shocked at the sight of

Sakuma, who had grown out his hair. However, when Sakuma told the mistress that he was on a secret military investigation, she had immediately stopped her enquiring, and answered all the questions Sakuma had asked. The “Hanabishi” was indeed worthy of serving army generals on a regular basis.

As expected, Colonel Mutou had been drinking with geishas at the Hanabishi late into the night.

That had not been all. According to the mistress, another customer had been drunk and fallen asleep in the room next to the Colonel’s.

“What kind of person was the customer?” Sakuma had hurriedly asked, but the mistress assured him that the customer was certainly not a suspicious character.

“He’s the president of a small trading company, a regular customer of the inn. A kind and humorous man, he’s always making our younger geishas laugh…”

Sakuma had cut her off at this point, and proceeded to further ask, “Does the customer have any distinctive traits?”

“Traits? Let’s see…he’s around fifty, slightly tanned skin, a lean frame, but there really isn’t anything distinctive…”

“I’ll give an example, is his left leg a little stiff and had to use a cane? Or is he always wearing a white leather glove on his right hand?”

The mistress shook her head.

—Perhaps I’m mistaken?

As Sakuma prepared to leave, the mistress seemed to have suddenly thought of something, and called out to him.

“Oh, that’s right! Now that you mention it, the customer had found something Colonel Mutou had left on the night. It’s a cigarette case, but it’s empty, so I’ve been holding on to it. If you have to go to General Staff Headquarters in the future, would you mind returning it to him for me?”

The mistress had handed the cigarette case to Sakuma with a wry smile, but as he was on his way to General Staff Headquarters, an unusual idea had surfaced in his mind.

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“Your left hand is a prosthetic, isn’t it?”

Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki merely hummed at Sakuma’s enquire, and did not answer.

Sakuma had taken the cigarette case to an investigation room within General Staff Headquarters to have the case examined, and no fingerprints were found on the surface of the case.

To be specific, besides the fingerprints of Colonel Mutou, the mistress of Hanabishi, and Sakuma, there was none of another person’s.

—The fingerprints of the customer who found the case had not been there.

With that noted, Sakuma had strung the set of clues together in his mind.

When Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had been arrested overseas for espionage, he had lost his left hand to torturing. It was said that the fingers of prosthetic hands produced in Europe were able to move. To hold onto a cane, or lifting bowls and cups, it would only require training to allow their movements to move so fluidly one would not be able to know about the prosthetic. Under the dim lights of an inn, it would still be possible for a prosthetic to pass off as a real limb, but it would be impossible at the moment to find a prosthetic hand that would not be discovered under the eyes of many while being exposed to sunlight.

—What purpose does a spy serve once they become suspected?

The Lieutenant Colonel had said this before, and had meant himself.

The loss of Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki’s left hand had left a distinctive trait, rendering the Lieutenant Colonel unable to truly
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carry out his duties as a spy overseas, therefore he had established the D-Agency, and turned his focus on training “invisible people” that could replace himself. Alternatively, he had instead worn a white leather glove on his right hand, leant onto a cane and dragged his left foot as he walked, giving himself conspicuous and memorable appearance.

—Just like a magic trick.

Sakuma had been fairly certain of his thoughts.

Everyone’s gazes would be attracted to the exaggerated movements of the Lieutenant Colonel. Once the traits were removed, the man who always leans on a cane and dons a white leather glove on his right hand would easily be considered as another person. Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki can walk perfectly well without a cane, and his right hand which he kept concealed in the glove is probably intact. The mistress of Hanabishi had also been his witness, stating that he was “a kind and humorous man”. Once the disguise of the glove, cane and limping left foot was removed, as well as changing his normally deliberate stern expression, no one would think that they are the same person.

If the opponent had been a foreign intelligence agency, it would have been a different matter, if he were to defeat a layman, it would be more than enough. For example, Colonel Mutou.

“That jackass Mutou had gotten himself drunk, and leaked every piece of confidential information to a geisha, then finish by dropping his property in the hall, I had not expected him to be this idiotic. After Mutou had left, I stepped out onto the hallway, and that bastard’s cigarette case was in front of my eyes. The geisha that had been accompanying me had held on to my right arm. Under those circumstances, it would be unnatural to not pick it up with my left hand. Even though I left the case to the mistress and left, I did not anticipate you having it examined for fingerprints.”

The shadow let out a low chuckle.

The founder of the D-Agency had concealed his identity and observed the Colonel from the shadows.

Colonel Mutou had wanted to use the D-Agency to cover up his failure.

But in truth, Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki had been waiting for this chance all along.

His motive had been…

We are a poor unit without a sufficient budget.

The Lieutenant Colonel had said this before in the past.

However, Colonel Mutou, whom had had been caught in the blunder had no choice but to comply with their requests from then on, and set aside a larger budget from the vast amount of confidential funds of the General Staff Headquarters…

“Miyoshi was impressed with you. You really were going to cut your stomach open there, weren’t you?” Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki said, seemingly to find it amusing, and smiled.

—That’s right, and now I understand.

It had been a certain night, a joke Miyoshi had made when Sakuma reprimanded the students for discussing about imperialism. Miyoshi had, at the same time, stressed on the place where the microfilm had been hidden during the jest, giving a clue to Sakuma.

“Do you have any interest in receiving our spy training?”

At Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki’s suggestion, Sakuma shook his head without a word.

When Sakuma had mentally prepared himself and took a final glance behind him, he found a small smile tugging at the corners of Miyoshi’s lips, and immediately understood his intentions. Sakuma had therefore issued the command to search the back of the imperial portrait in English.

Miyoshi had probably been genuinely impressed with him.

However, only half-heartedly.

Miyoshi and the others had noticed the second half of the situation well in advance before Sakuma did—Colonel Mutou had purposely set it up to cover up his own mistake. For a person like me, it would be impossible to serve as a spy under Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki…

“I am still a soldier in the end.”

As though waving away the vain hope that had surfaced in his heart, Sakuma categorically said, “Should the need arise, I am prepared to sacrifice myself at a moment’s notice. However…”

Sakuma had nearly delivered words even he himself had not expected, and stopped in his tracks in astonishment.

—However, I refuse to be a pawn that is used, then cast aside…

Under his complicated thoughts, Sakuma forcefully swallowed back the words that had appeared in his heart.

That was a belief that should not exist in the mind of a soldier. However, once a thought like this had sprouted in the heart, it would be even more impossible for it to disappear.

As though he had been nailed onto the spot, Sakuma had stopped his footsteps, and was left behind by Lieutenant Colonel Yuuki, who leaned against his cane and walked in a stiff gait.

Sakuma watched the lean figure of the Lieutenant Colonel round a corner, and disappear.

He gazed up at the blue sky, as though someone were snickering.

Joker Game - Volume 1 - Chapter 2.1

At this time of year, the vast sea that stretches before the eyes is strikingly blue.

Early on since Japan had opened its ports in the Meiji era, elegant western-style houses have been constructed in areas of Yamate, around the Port of Yokohama as far as the eye can see. A building surrounded by white walls stood out amongst the others—the estate of the British Consul constructed by the British.

It was exactly a week ago when Gamou Jirou had been to the estate.

He was an employee at “Tailor Tersashima”, an old shop at Bashamichi. When he had gone to the estate to deliver a suit last Sunday, the Consul General, Ernest Graham, had been present and had nothing to do, and invited him to a game of chess. Now at the age of sixty-five, Graham, who was confident in his skills in chess, considered it a miracle that the young people of Japan were able to play chess at all, and had not expected his opponent to be evenly matched with himself.

Gamou had won the first round with ease.

Graham had been surprised, and thus had gotten serious.

At the end of the day, with three wins, two losses and two ties, Graham had won by a thin margin. From then on, every day, after Graham had finished his duties at the embassy and returned to his residence, he would call Gamou over to play chess with him.

Today is Sunday, and Gamou had been summoned early in the morning.

A checkered chess board with the pieces arranged on top was set between the two men sitting by the second floor window of the

estate

“Check.” Gamou announced as he moved his knight.

Graham frowned.

“Hmm…so that’s a way to play it…”

He removed the cigar hanging from his mouth, caring less about the ashes that fell to the carpet, and gazed at the chessboard for a while, only to finally throw the pieces in his hand onto the board.

“This way, I’ve won fifteen, and lost seventeen, with six stalemates.” Gamou smiled. “You must have duties to attend to, let’s call it a day…”

“Hold on, now. It’s Sunday anyways, so let’s have another round.”

Graham had already begun arranging the chess pieces as he spoke. Just then, the wife of the Consul, Lady Jane Graham came in.

“Dear, a word if you’ll please?” the Lady said as she walked towards Graham.

She was about forty-five, almost twenty years younger than Graham himself. In contrast to the Consul’s plump body, she had a slim figure and amber eyes, giving her a distinctive aura of her own. For some reason, her pale brown pupils were filled with unease, her thin eyebrows twisted into a frown.

“I can’t leave right now as you can see. Let’s talk about later…” Graham seemed to have noticed his wife’s distress, pausing halfway and stopped placing the chess pieces.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

The Lady silently pointed outside the window.

Looking out, a man in workers’ clothing can be seen behind the trees of the front yard, seeming to be deliberately hiding behind them, constantly peering into the residence.

“That man came into the backyard yesterday too,” the Lady whispered. “When the maid had asked about him, he said ‘I’m from Yokohama Waterworks, I’m here to check for any leakages’, but I heard he never did inspect the water supply, and keeps trying to look into the house. It unnerves me…”

“Let me see.” Graham stood up from his chair and gazed out of the window. The Lady also took a glance from behind her husband, then turned around and said in a low voice, “Ah, that disgusting look in his eyes, just like that of a spy…”

Graham turned to Gamou. “What do you think?”

“He’s probably a member of the Japanese military police.” Gamou replied as he placed the chess pieces on the board.

“A military policeman? How do know?”

“This is very simple reasoning,” Gamou said, lifting his head to look out of the window. “His complexion is really tan, except for his pale forehead. Additionally, from my point of view, I can see that he doesn’t have much hair. From these points I can deduce that his job must have him walking around outside all day while wearing a hat. Then why isn’t he wearing it now? It must be because it would be a dead giveaway of his job. Think about it, with an easily identifiable hat and a career he wishes to be kept secret, there’s only the military police.”

After a while, Graham let out a chuckle, jiggling his pot belly.

“I guess that must be it.” Graham winked at the Lady, “Surprising isn’t it? For a kid his age, and even Japanese, he speaks fluent English and is exceptionally sharp. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have lost to him at chess at all.”

He patted his wife on the shoulder, and returned to his seat, facing Gamou.

“Well, now that we know about the truth, let’s have another round.” Graham arranged the pieces, shaking his head as he muttered. “How troublesome, for someone like that to also be

considered as a spy."

He suddenly lifted his head, as though he had just thought of something.

"Ah yes, we have a saying back in the British Empire, 'Spying is a despicable job that only gentlemen can do.' Take Baron Baden-Powell as an example, back in the days of the Boer Wars, he had disguised himself as an entomologist, slipping into enemy territory to be a spy of course. To successfully fulfill his duties as a spy, the Baron had not only learned how to use an insect net, he had also prepared a sketchbook with drawings of butterflies. In other words, if he wrote down the situation in enemy territory into the patterns of the butterflies' wings, he won't draw suspicion to himself should the enemy investigate him. Furthermore, to avoid being arrested, Baron Baden-Powell had even shockingly soaked his shirt in brandy. Thanks to this, when he was arrested behind enemy lines, they had thought he was a mere drunkard—this man who reeked of alcohol cannot possibly be a spy, and so they released him immediately. Also, the Baron…"

Graham had stopped in the abrupt realization of having fallen once again into his old habit of speaking too much.

"Basically," he shrugged. "Being a spy is 'gentlemen's work'. That man standing in the front yard with the stupid look on his face doesn't even stand the chance of being a spy. We don't have to worry about him."

"But dearest…"the Lady stared hard at Graham. "Even so, back in the days of the Great War, the famous German spy 'Mata Hari'[1] was not a gentleman."

"Eh? Mata Hari? Well, you're correct…but it's because she was a woman…" Graham stuttered.

The Lady then turned to Gamou.

"Mr. Gamou, it is because of you, I dare say this: Japan is going down the wrong path. The actions the Japanese army had recently taken in mainland China are absurd. If it goes on, Japan will be

isolated by the whole world. Or does Japan wish to become enemies with the rest of the world? Now they're even sending spies to the estate to protest against us, it's very shameful…"

"No, Jane! No! Stop it." Graham said unusually sharply to his wife. "Mr. Gamou is an employee at Tailor Terashima, he's not affiliated with the Japanese government and military. He's here as my opponent in chess, do not lash out at him."

"Ah…I suppose you're right. My deepest apologies, Mr. Gamou, I have no idea what's gotten into me."

"It's alright, don't think on it too much."

"You're a little tense, it must be because you're not used to the Japanese climate. Go get some rest." Graham stood up and wrapped an arm around the Lady, and said, "As for the man who's in our front yard, just tell the servants to ask him to leave. If they don't let go and carry on with their actions, I'll protest against the Japanese government…"

After Graham had escorted the Lady out of the door, he returned to his chair and shook his head.

"My wife can be such a bother. My apologies…let's continue then. I suppose I'll make the first move this round?"

Graham extended his hand towards the chessboard, and moved his pawn to the front of his king. Gamou, on the other hand, had used the pawn to reinforce his lines. Graham had not changed one bit, still opening the game using the Double King's Pawn Opening, an opening he was skilled with. It was quite possible that he would use the Scotch Opening next.

"Humph, a spy? Imbecile, spying is a job for gentlemen. A spy's job always comes with adventure and romance…a lowlife like him can never be a spy." Graham muttered to himself as he played.

Gamou glanced at the board, acting as though he was thinking about his next move, while smirking without his opponent's notice.

—If Graham were to know that the talented man before his eyes

was a real spy, what sort of expression would he make?

Gamou suppressed his urge to find out the answer, and killed Graham's bishop with his rook.